



Sportsmanship in Youth Sports

Justplay

A Revolutionary Approach to
Youth Sport Administration and Sportsmanship

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*By carefully compiling and interpreting a variety of statistics,
sport administrators can improve behavior management.*

Jack Roberts, executive director of the Michigan High School Athletic Association, is credited with stating, “Sportsmanship is the starting point—if not the essence—of good citizenship. It is what we’re supposed to teach in educational athletics more than anything else” (Engh, 1999, p. 23). This article explores how Justplay, a program based on the systematic collection, organization, and dissemination of data about games in sport leagues—supports efforts to structure youth sport for the outcome of good citizenship. While Justplay does not attempt to define sportsmanship, distinguishing between good and poor behavior is central to its success.

The original goals of the first community-organized youth sport programs (Pop Warner Football in 1929 and Little League in 1938) revolved around the development of good citizenship and good sportsmanship. The founders of these programs were actually reiterating principles made famous by the father of the modern Olympics, Baron de Coubertin, who asserted that participation in sport could help develop engaged, balanced citizens.

Contemporary athletes share this perspective. In his book, *Every Second Counts*, Lance Armstrong (2003) asserted,

A team is just another version of a community. The same principles apply to any communal undertaking, whether you’re talking about a community garden, a neighborhood watch, or racing around France: if you want something, first you have to give it. You have to invest in it. (pp. 166-167)

Armstrong, one of the most accomplished professional athletes of the past century, reinforces for us the relationship between sport and community. A community does not just have members, it has citizens. And citizens have citizenship, which, based on the origin of the word, implies that one is a “servant of the community.” This is precisely Armstrong’s message: in order to be successful as a team, you first must have a community mindset. You have to serve your community (team), invest in your community (team), and recognize that you are a small part of a bigger picture (member of a team, citizen of a community).

The potential for youth sport participation to build positive character traits has been well documented (for examples, see Malina & Cumming, 2003; Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1992; Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002). However it appears that when society moves away from an emphasis on sportsmanship, toward an emphasis on outcome, the negative effects on our children and communities may exceed the benefits (for examples, see Gilbert, 2001; Kleiber & Roberts, 1981; Smith & Smoll, 1996). So the question becomes, how do we, as youth sport researchers and administrators, help youth sport organizations structure and administrate youth sports in a manner that ensures that it has a positive, rather than a negative, effect on our children, families, schools, and communities? How do we get individuals to act as a team and to invest

in their community as Roberts and Armstrong describe? What values and behavior do we want to endorse within the educational sport domain?

Justplay Development and Functionality

The Justplay Behavior Management Program is a tool that can help administrators achieve that goal of bringing together individuals to form teams of engaged citizens, and, in fact, communities. Justplay was designed to help youth sport administrators (volunteer and otherwise) bridge the gap between research and application. Reports generated by the program empower administrators to make data-driven staffing and policy decisions regarding any action or inaction that may be necessary to anticipate, respond to, or avoid problematic behavior from spectators, coaches, and players. A sport league administrator might, for example, use data from Justplay to inform her or his decision about which referees to assign to particular upcoming games that have the potential for poor sportsmanship and violence.

According to the National Alliance for Youth Sports (2002), approximately 70 percent of youth sport organizations in North America are administrated by volunteers. While this is an admirable statistic, and one we do not necessarily want to see decline, it poses certain limitations. Volunteer administrators may or may not have the necessary skills to effectively operate a youth sport organization. They may not have degrees in parks and recreation, sport management, education, youth development, or sport psychology, and they may have no youth sport administrative experience whatsoever. But they do have one important, basic requirement, namely, the willingness to do the job. With this understanding of the youth sport environment, Justplay set out to provide a tool that would enable these administrators to be more effective and in control of the environment for which they are responsible.

In 2000, the first prototype of the Justplay Behavior Management Program was launched. The goal in developing Justplay was to create a program that could help to identify and quantify the variables that contribute to problem behavior within the team sport environment. First, in order to obtain relevant data with which to quantify behavior, Justplay concluded that a participant group or stakeholder group within the game environment would have to provide the necessary information. After careful consideration of the four participant groups that youth team sports include—spectators, coaches, players, and officials—it became clear that officials were the participant group that could provide the most objective data. Officials are the only participant group with no stake in the outcome of the game; their presence is to ensure that the game is played as fairly as possible, and the officials are held accountable for their expertise and are periodically assessed and supervised.

Second, Justplay had to determine other common elements that might contribute to problem behavior. Most of these variables are part of the game logistics: venue, age or division, skill or league, gender, and game type (regular

season game, exhibition, tournament, and playoff). Having identified *what* information to gather, and *who* was going to provide the information, a Justplay “Conduct Report Card” was created in order to capture the necessary information. After every game, each official, regardless of his or her role within the game, independently fills out a Conduct Report Card. On that card, officials rate the overall behavior of the coaches, players, and spectators of each team on a scale of one (very good) to five (very poor). They also use the same scale to rate their own personal satisfaction level within the context of the game. This satisfaction rating is not an evaluation of how well each official felt that she or he officiated the game, but rather represents an enjoyment quotient or index to identify how well the official enjoyed carrying out his or her duties for that game.

Multiple blank Conduct Report Cards can be provided to each official in a pad format, and officials can keep track of their ratings for games they officiate on the pad provided. A couple of times a week, officials can log-on to the Justplay web site and enter their card data online. To facilitate online data entry, officials select the games they officiated from a list created by the game schedules that Justplay receives in advance of the game date. The blank card appearing on the screen for data entry automatically includes game date, team names, venue, and other categories. These appear as pre-populated fields on the entry screen so that the rating numbers are the only data that need to be entered. The entire process takes only a few moments of the official’s time. All data entered by officials is cross-tabulated against their age, years of experience, and level of certification.

All the information entered into the database by officials is then organized and displayed in a library of dynamic graphs that are available online on a password-privileged basis. There are presently eight standard graphs related to conduct of coaches, spectators, and players, as well as ten standard graphs related to official trends, strengths, and weaknesses. All graphs can be viewed with team name identification *on* or *off*. This feature allows administrators to print or show graphs while protecting the anonymity of the participant groups. Administrators also have the capability to create users within their own association.

The graphs seen in figures 1, 2, and 3 illustrate two main features of behavior, namely, the average conduct of each participant group and the occurrence of critical incidents. Critical incidents are any four (poor) or five (very poor) ratings. These are tracked separately to help indicate more precisely where, when, and under what circumstances problem behavior occurs.

For example, in figure 1, which uses data collected from a relatively small baseball association, we see that each division (grouped by age) within this association has three different colored bars depicting the average conduct of each participant group (players, coaches, and spectators) within that age group.

This graph presents a direct picture of the average behavior defined by age within the association. The Midget division

(16-18 year olds) is shown to have the poorest overall average for each participant group, with the players showing the greatest frequency of occurrences of problematic behavior of the three participant groups. The average conduct for players within the entire association throughout the entire season was 1.79, whereas the Midget division average was 2.5. The data selection filters for the graphs were set to include data from the entire season, for all game types, and across all venues. This is an aggregate picture of conduct across the association as a whole.

Figure 2 shows a graph entitled “Critical Incidents by Division” for the same association. In this graph, it is evident that all three participant groups in the Pee Wee division (12-13 year olds) had more critical incidents throughout the season than the Midget division. It is important to note, however, that the Pee Wee division played six times the number of games as the Midget division, thus giving them a lower average number of critical incidents per game.

The graph in figure 3 identifies the impact of poor behavior on the official’s satisfaction. For each official, three data series are provided. The blue bar represents the official’s satisfaction rating within games that have no poor behavior at all, the teal bar represents the official’s average satisfaction rating, and the orange bar represents the official’s satisfaction when he or she officiates games in which that official awarded a rating of poor or very poor behavior. It is important to note not only the height of each bar, but also the difference between the values of the blue bar and the orange bar. That difference provides a possible indication of an official’s sensitivity to poor or very poor behavior.

There are also several other standard graphs available in the Justplay program, as well as the capability of providing customized graphs for clients wishing to monitor particular correlations.

Applications and Usefulness

Justplay was originally piloted in minor hockey over three hockey seasons. During the first season, participant groups were not made aware of the program. At the beginning of the second season, however, news of the program was leaked, but not publicly announced. Once participant groups became aware that their behavior was being monitored, and that they might be held accountable for that behavior, behavior improved by 65 percent (i.e., the number of critical incidents was reduced by almost two-thirds). In the third year, Justplay asked the administrators to continue their silence regarding the program in order to see what would happen with behavior, given the improvement in the previous year and the complete absence of any positive reinforcement or negative consequences associated with good or bad reported behavior. In the third year, the improvement in behavior reversed and declined to about the same level of problems witnessed in the first year.

Currently Justplay is working with ringette, hockey, basketball, baseball, soccer, and football associations at local, provincial, and national levels. A sufficient volume of data

to identify trends geographically or across sport domains has not yet been collected, but certainly the potential to make such correlations in the future has been established. There exists the possibility of combining Justplay with other social research programs to look at behavior trends in relation to socioeconomic markers as well.

Administrators typically use the program to identify and resolve problems at a local level. Many administrators are using the program to facilitate and justify coach selection, to set and enforce association behavior standards, and to measure the effectiveness of other programs used to positively influence behavior. For example, over this past hockey season, an association working with Justplay required their coaches to participate in a weekend workshop designed to improve their understanding of age-appropriate coaching strategies. When Justplay examined coach behavior pre- and post-workshop, with particular attention paid to coaches of younger divisions (under 8 years old), we discovered no improvement of behavior. In fact, within one month of the workshop, some coaches of the very youngest divisions had some of the worst behavior in the association. Upon examination, it would appear that the workshop failed to generate a lasting positive change in behavior among the coaches.

Finally, the program can be used to predict high-risk game situations, which allows associations to be preemptive and proactive. For example, one of the documented consequences of poor behavior is the attrition of officials (National Association of Sports Officials, 2001). To prevent this, Justplay acts a signal to officials that their expertise, concerns, and value within the youth sport environment are taken seriously. By analyzing the data provided by officials, the program can provide a scheduling tool that simultaneously considers all information entered by officials and that creates an official schedule that pairs the most appropriate official to the game situation. This intervention—prior to an official’s decision to quit—can contribute to increasing the satisfaction level of officials and help to recruit and retain officials.

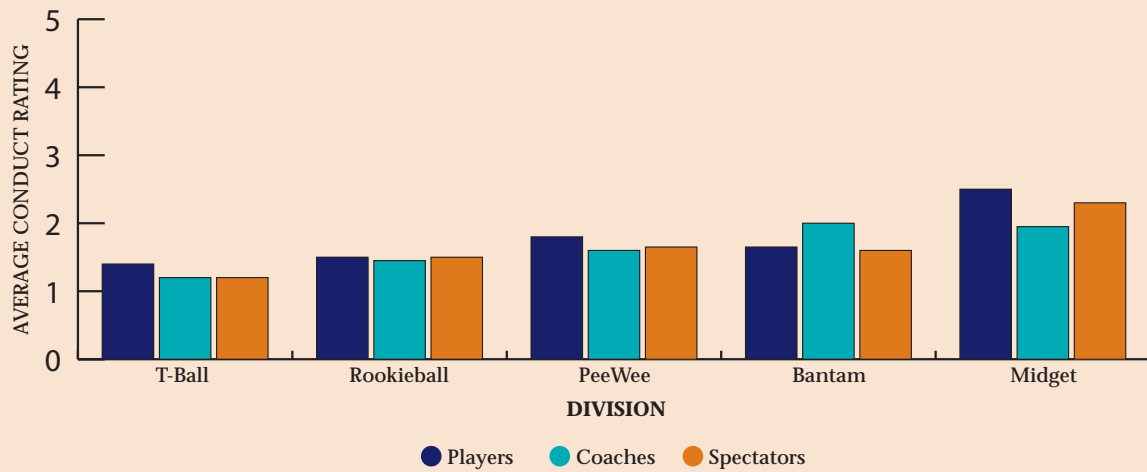
The data collected to date from the officials has allowed the identification of some trends regarding officials across multiple sports. In hockey and soccer, for example, officials with between five and nine years of experience have the poorest satisfaction ratings relative to the number of games with critical incidents. It is also this group, along with officials who have more than 25 years of experience, that report the most critical incidents in their game. This is in contrast to the generally held belief of association participant groups, who tend to assume that it is the least experienced officials who officiate games with the most critical incidents.

Educational Sports

In his book, *Reforming Sports Before the Clock Runs Out*, Bruce Svare (2004), director of the National Institute for Sports Reform, quotes Ira Berkow, writing for the *New York Times*:

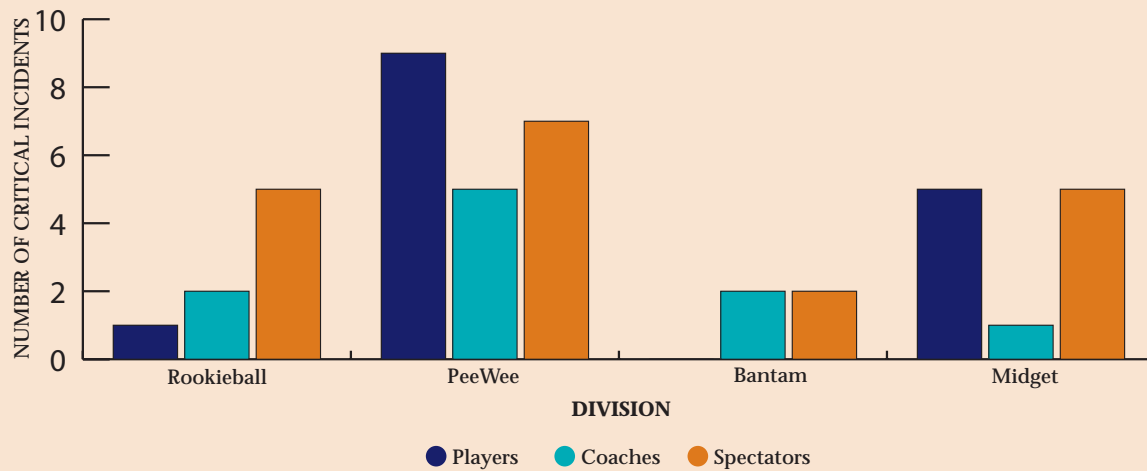
It has been said that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. With the glorification of sports, it turns out, the edification of students is diminished. And if education becomes our

Figure 1. Conduct Rating by Division



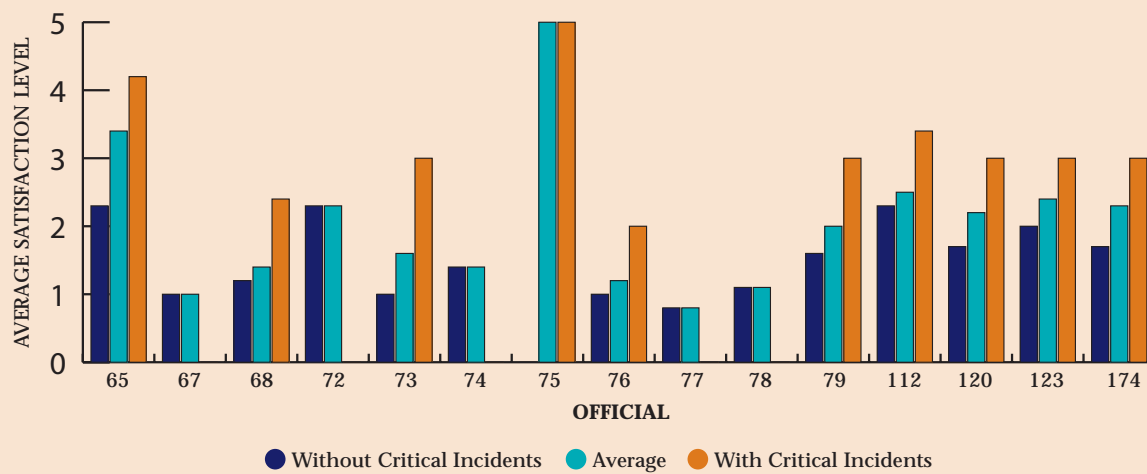
Port Colborne Minor Baseball Association

Figure 2. Critical Incidents by Division



Port Colborne Minor Baseball Association

Figure 3. Impact of Critical Incidents



Port Colborne Minor Baseball Association

weakest link, and entertainment our strongest, then there is trouble festering. (p. 234)

And Singleton (2003) has suggested that competitive sports within our school system today offer no greater values than those associated with winning or losing. Yet, a study in Manitoba, Canada, indicated that 90 percent of parents surveyed felt that behavior, attitude, fair play, and sportsmanship were very important components of the physical education curriculum and should be included on report cards (Sander & Halas, 2003). Obviously, there is some disparity between what experts say educational sports is accomplishing and what parents want it to accomplish.

If school sport continues to singularly emphasize and glorify outcomes, as Singleton suggested it currently does, then society will experience the consequences associated with a weak educational system. Svare (2004) goes even further to say this about educational sport, "...we desperately need remedies for issues like declining sportsmanship, increasingly physical and often dirty play, the alarming rise in athletic injuries, the often unsafe and inadequate athletic facilities in many schools, the increased usage of performance enhancing drugs by very young scholastic athletes, the unethical recruiting and transferring of players..." (p. 87). Although Justplay cannot help to resolve all of these issues, it can go a long way to help resolve the concerns related to poor behavior, by enabling administrators to objectively identify the variables that contribute to the problem behavior.

Conclusion

Not all children are involved in physical activity or sport outside of school. Of the 48,374,000 children (ages 5-17) eligible for youth sport in the United States in 1995, only approximately 22 million, or 45 percent, played in an agency-sponsored sport outside of school (Seefeldt & Ewing, 1996). Therefore, to ensure the most broad and positive impact of sport for children, it would appear that the educational domain is a critical, if not the most important, resource. Within educational sport and physical education classes, society has the opportunity to offer *all* children the potential benefits of physical activity and sport participation, and the opportunity to build engaged, invested citizens.

Until now, problems and variables contributing to unruly behavior have been primarily anecdotal in nature. We know we have problems, but we do not know quantitatively the scope and seriousness of the problems, nor can we measure the effectiveness of programs implemented to positively affect these problems. In order to establish youth sport environments that ensure sportsmanlike behavior, administrators must first be able to identify behavior that is problematic or unsportsmanlike. Without knowing the sources and specific variables that contribute to problem behavior, it is difficult, at best, to set standards and to ensure that those standards are met.

Some may argue that standards are not universal, but reflect regional norms and values—certainly there is some credence to the argument that these standards are arbitrary

and not necessarily universal. However, there will be general agreement that a particular behavior is poor, and that other behavior is good. There is a tendency to focus on the precise lines of demarcation, but the differences in tolerance may reflect local sensibilities. Justplay receives data from the local communities, so this is automatically factored out of the equation. The specific tolerance levels are important only to the extent a community seeks to enforce their own standard; this process is respected in the Justplay program.

Fortunately, initial results affirm that Justplay is a tool that provides youth sport administrators and educators with the information needed to make data-driven decisions regarding the implementation and enforcement of standards and policies.

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